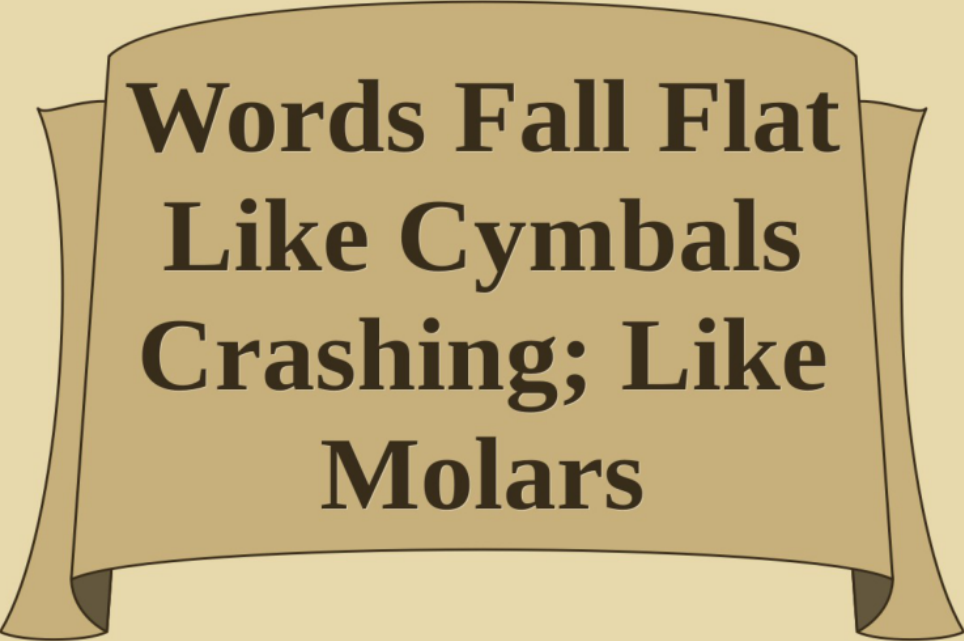




**Words Fall Flat
Like Cymbals
Crashing; Like
Molars**

timeless_alice

Words Fall Flat Like Cymbals Crashing; Like Molars Gnashing by timeless_alice

Series: Stars Aligned AU [1]

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: F/M, Fluff and Angst, Friendship, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Not Canon Compliant, Pining, Self-Harm, Suicide attempt discussion, this is extremely self indulgent but im doing my best

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Patricia Blum Uris, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris, The Losers Club (IT)

Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Patricia Blum Uris/Stanley Uris

Status: Completed

Published: 2019-11-07

Updated: 2019-11-26

Packaged: 2019-12-19 15:51:07

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 3

Words: 12,553

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Stan rejoins the Losers in Derry a few days after Mike calls.

He has a heart to heart with Richie.

Everything will be okay, in the end.

1. Reunion

Author's Note:

this is an everyone lives au but important things:

-stan attempts suicide but patricia finds him in time, then goes to Derry in his place until he's released from the hospital.

-the whole situation takes place over a week

it's fine

Patricia had said that she had a surprise for them, if they would just be patient about it. And no, she had promised because by then she had learned what kind of town Derry was, this was not some trick related to killer clowns or murderers of any kind. So the Losers, with varying degrees of patience and a general belief that Mrs. Uris would have no reason to actually lie to them, allowed her to herd them into her hotel room, where the waiting game would begin.

For the most part the small group of friends talked amongst themselves in low whispers for the irrational fear that someone, *something*, might be listening in on them. The mounting tension of the last few days was settling against them, heavy enough to bow backs and duck heads, bringing with it growing - exacerbating - fear that having them all in the same room for a "surprise" would cause some kind of disaster. It was enough to make nerves taut enough to snap.

"Come on, Pat," Richie said, voice rising above the din of idle chatter, so sure that if they were left alone like this for too long a fight breaking out was inevitable. She shot him a look, her brows furrowing and lips pursing in disapproval of the nickname, though she did not dignify him with a response. It had not taken her long to learn, primarily by observing his banter with Eddie, that telling him to stop would only encourage him. Regardless of her lack of reply, he went on, leaning back on the hotel armchair until he was practically sliding out of it. "Just tell us what we're sitting around for. I'm going to die of boredom before Pennywise even has a chance to eat me."

There was a long moment of silence as everyone turned to look at him with varying degrees of emotion, ranging from exasperation to disapproval to possibly murderous intent. He half expected a "beep beep" to be uttered, just to get him to shut up about mentioning It, something he already regretted as a lump formed in the pit of his stomach. But instead, when it was clear he had somehow managed to get a grasp on his own brain-to-mouth filter, their expectant gazes turned to Patricia. She looked to her phone, which glowed gently in her hands.

"Just a few more minutes," she said. "I promise." And her voice was so terribly, achingly earnest that it made Richie feel a little bad for having said anything, straightening up again in his chair and averting his eyes from her. She was so hopeful and certain in the fact that they would like whatever secret she was keeping, that they all feel back into uneasy waiting.

Seconds stretched into minutes stretched into an apparent eternity, and Richie had gotten it his head to annoy Eddie, who was trying his best to have a conversation with Bill just in front of him and was, as a consequence, not paying attention to him. This came in the form of nudging him with his foot, first his shoulder and then the back of his head, right where the skull met the spine. He could see, visibly see, the annoyance coiling in Eddie's back as he grew ever closed to turning around and snapping at Richie with all that colorful language of his. When Bill sent him a short but incredibly cautionary glance that bordered on something that could be called Scolding Parent, Richie could only smile back at him.

By dint of where the two were sitting, as opposed to spread throughout the rest of the room like the others, there was a silent invitation presented to him. One that a large part of him wanted to accept; to sit beside Eddie and just be a little closed to him. Close enough to touch, if he wanted, in a way that was a little more intimate than his childish game or what would be considered friendly. But the idea of it caused his chest to tighten and his throat to close, wrapping around the terror that gripped him so tight it might grind his bones to dust, until it was almost too difficult to breathe. So annoying Eddie into giving him attention was all he had at the moment, a careful and familiar detached intimacy, until he was

able to unwind into something approaching normal.

But before he could push Eddie to his breaking point, there was a soft tapping at the door. It was quiet, almost quiet enough to be drowned out by everyone's hushed voices, but the thunk of wood still felt like it rattled around in Richie's chest. It was like all the air was sucked from the room as they looked towards the door, apprehension doubling down on them as fears of the worst crept into their heads. Which was stupid, Richie knew as he sat up straighter with every muscle in his body poised to make a run for it, because they were all there waiting for something, weren't they? Wasn't that the whole point of this gathering, waiting around for a promised surprise that was almost an hour in the making?

Then Patty moved, and all eyes were once again on her, watching her climb to her feet with a flourish and a bright, beaming smile that lit up her whole face. She padded to the door, and for a moment Richie wondered if someone in all their paranoia over every goddamn thing that had been happening to them, would lunge to stop her. But no one did, no one made a move, and so Richie didn't either. And that led him to wonder if everyone else was having a similar thought to his and they were all waiting for someone else to make the first move, before it was too late.

She peered through the peephole and everyone tensed, just by a margin of a few degrees. But then, but then...she stepped back, a light motion that Richie could only call a skip. Or maybe a bounce. It was something so airy and oddly carefree that whatever was waiting for them on the other side could only be a good thing, and he supposed he was okay with that. It still didn't make the tension in his shoulders ease.

Without a look to them, without even a word of explanation or forewarning - because that would be too much to ask for, apparently - she pulled the door open. And the hush in the room became a little more absolute, ran a little deeper as the breathlessness of fear turned to something a little more pleasant, a little more manageable.

There, in the hall way, a suitcase in hand and a backpack slung over one shoulder, was Stanley Uris. Alive and in the flesh. He looked at them behind a pair of glasses and from under curling dark hair that

looked hastily combed, expression a little sheepish with the smallest of nervous smiles pulling at his lips. Everyone stared back in a beat of stunned silence, while shock in the best of ways prickled along Richie's skin to form goosebumps wherever it touched.

In that moment Stan reached out his free hand - Richie could not help but notice the way fingers pressed the cuff of his shirt to his palm - to wrap around Patty, who let herself be pulled to his chest so she could wrap her own arms around his shoulders. He gently stroked her hair, nuzzling against her to whisper something that none of the others could hear, but they could all see her squeeze him tight in response. Then, she pulled away and finally turned to them, gesturing at a Stan who looked for all the world like he'd rather be anywhere else. He shifted uncomfortably under their stares, readjusting the too long sleeves of his button down so that he could clamp down against their cuffs.

"Surprise," she said, less an exclamation of joy and more a simple statement that had taken on its own nervous air, as if whatever apprehension Stan was feeling had transmitted to her through their embrace.

It was then that something seemed to click. Her words having broken whatever spell there was that had taken hold of them and the cracking dam finally gave away. The fear that had festered over the past few days and stunned silence were swept away by a wash of burning joy. The kind that burned in the stomach and flowed through every possible inch, pressing against skin and throat and eyes as if there was too much to be contained in a physical body. Like everyone was glowing in that one perfect instant.

"Stan!" It was Ben who made the first move, climbing to his feet with clumsy speed and rushing to him, grabbing him in a bear hug that lifted him off the ground. It elicited a surprised shout from Stan, which gave way to uncertain laughter when Ben practically carried him through the doorway, with Patty following behind with the discarded suitcase. The door was shut behind them.

By that point everyone had stood, and the moment Stan's feet touched back to ground they were upon him, pulling him into a hundred different hugs as if they needed to ensure that he would not

slip away from them. As if some part of them, so conditioned to facing the unreal, thought that this might just be another illusion, just another cruel trick to play on them. So they pressed around him, the friend they had come so close to having lost. Seven bodies bundled close in a tangle of limbs, with Stan right in the middle, eventually dragging them all to the floor under its own weight. And there they remained, in something that sat in the realm of a "cuddle pile" that they had employed as children.

Hands ruffled hair and knocked askew glasses, voices talking over each other in their joy and excitement at this development. Tears pricked at eyes with the same relief that had come when they had learned that he was alive the first time. No one wanted to let him go.

"Careful!" Stan said, though his admonishment was softened by his light laugh as he gently nudged those around him with a sharp elbow. "I just got out of the hospital, I don't need you people sending me back because someone messed up my stitches."

"Shut up and just let us hug you," was Beverly's reply, her smile audible though Richie was unable to see it, determined as he was to be close to Stan. Still, everyone shifted position around him, just in case.

"You people, do you hear him?" Richie scoffed. "You're stuck with us for the long haul, pal. Besides, Eds could probably fix anything we mess up."

Someone aimed a smack at the back of Richie's head, skipping the beep altogether, and he couldn't argue that he didn't deserve it. But it wouldn't have mattered anyway, in that singular instant of time that some pulsing childish part of him wished would never end, because they were all happy. Alive and together and more or less whole, in a way that let them forget that Hell was still knocking at their door. And in that moment, too, Richie was able to pretend that Touch was not some horrid, taboo thing afforded to everyone but him.

It was a good while before they pulled away, with careful hesitation from that twofold fear of illusion: the denial kind of their own creation, and the malicious taunting kind. But the warmth and camaraderie held true, and it was not long before they had all moved

into a loose circle around the room. Eddie had claimed the armchair before Richie could, and he had half a mind to squeeze in beside him despite the chair definitely not being large enough for two full grown bodies. So instead he opted to sit on the floor right beside him, leaning against the chair as much as he dared.

Patricia for her part had taken her rightful place with Stan, nestled between his outstretched legs and with her back to his chest. Her hands held his on either side of her, fingers entwined, with her head angled just enough to look at him. Their expressions were soft in that sort of loving adoration that made Richie's stomach turn; not in the sneering way but in the way that came with a horrible building of *something* that could have been jealousy. So he tried to ignore it, to focus on the chatter of the room as everyone caught Stan up to speed with everything that could not have been conveyed over their few scattered minutes of phone calls. The events of the past few days were brushed over, stored away in the category of Let's Pretend That Isn't Happening Right Now, in favor of just talking about the past thirty years of their lives.

It was a little amazing, how easily everyone had fallen back into step with each other.

"When'd they let you out?" Bill was the one to ask, when it seemed like they had reached the end of the more pleasant conversation pieces. "The hospital, I mean." As if he could have meant anything else.

Stan frowned, letting go of Patty to touch the sleeves of his shirt. In the privacy of the room, with people who knew and understood, he had eventually decided to roll them up to his elbows. Everyone was making some sort of effort to not stare at the bandages around his forearms, covering from wrist to elbow, but the occasional fleeting glance was still taken. With that question he seemed to be considering rolling them back down to cover up the physical evidence of what had happened, but then his hands fell away to the floor on either side of him, palms flat against hotel carpet.

"Yesterday," he said. "I got a train last night." He averted his eyes from them, a slight hitch in his voice as he continued, "I almost didn't come. Twenty hours between there and here and-" A deep breath that

sounded like it was rattling in his chest. "A lot to think about. But I couldn't leave my wife alone with you people." Though the joke was there, he sounded high and strained with a million things that seemed to go unsaid. He rested his chin on Patricia's shoulder as he looked to Mike, who had been rather quiet all evening. "I hope you aren't beating yourself up over this. It's not your fault."

Something in Richie jolted, something just under his ribs like a gut punch, and the gears in his head turned. For everything that had been going on, he wasn't sure he had managed to put together the pieces that Mike might feel some guilt over what had happened. His phone call, leading right to Stan's...well. Mike hummed a reply, lifting a single shoulder in a shrug with a half hearted smile, all indications that he wasn't fully committed to the idea that he was blameless. The mood of the room at this took a heavy dip towards the melancholy, threatening to drag the group so recently reunited down with it.

"We're all here now," Eddie jumped in, quiet and soft and measured in a way that always made Richie's heart flutter, just a little. "That's what matters, I think."

Silence fell over them, but it was the uncomfortable kind that crept under skin to dig at nerves and bone until it drove you crazy with anxiety. The kind that pushed you right to the edge of whatever you could take, and then just a little more until you were plummeting into the abyss. Richie couldn't stand it, and not just because of how awkward it was. The silence was allowing him to churn in his thoughts, ones that formed from being so close to Eddie, and have those mingle and meld with the newfound tension in the air. He was becoming a bundle of explosives, inching ever closer to detonation.

Just because no one is mad at Stan for what he'd done and for the oath he'd broken, some hideous little voice in the back of his mind that sounded an awful lot like It said, doesn't mean they'll be okay with the secrets you hold.

He took a deep, steadying breath through his nose that he hoped no one noticed. "By the way, Stan," he said, taking it upon himself to change the topic and lighten the mood. So he wouldn't crack under the weight of all the ugly things that circled his head. "I can't believe

you managed to land someone so far out of your league." There were a few good natured laughs passed along them, combined with a few utterances of agreement, and the air lightened around them as everyone took the chance to think about anything at all positive. "She's a million times cooler than you ever were."

Patricia buried her face in her hands at the compliment, a bashful smile evident even under her palms. Stan held her tight, rocking her from side to side as he nuzzled under her guard to place a kiss on her cheek. At this the poor woman went an even brighter shade of red with embarrassment at the attention, worse than even Ben when Beverly paid him a compliment. And there was that jealousy again, burning in the pit of Richie's stomach and pressing against his throat, making his teasing smile turn down at the corners, just a bit.

"She's a hero for being able to put up with you guys without me," Stan said. "No idea how she does it."

"I put up with you, don't I?" Patty giggled, which turned into a shriek of laughter when Stan dug his fingers into her ribs. She swatted his hands away to keep him from tickling her any more, though she was still grinning at him.

"Betrayed by my own wife! I can't believe you'd do this to me, after twenty years!"

She tilted her head to place a kiss at the corner of his mouth, and he bumped his forehead against hers.

Richie wondered if Bill missed his wife, watching the two of them live this. He couldn't be the only person in the room feeling the way he was; at least, he hoped he wasn't. That would be a little pathetic.

Twenty years together, twenty years happy despite the...well, blip was putting everything a little mildly. But there wasn't a doubt in Richie's mind that if they survived all this, if they made it through til next sunrise then they would continue on together. He wouldn't call it unfair per se, because he knew better in that objective sense that came with age and maturity. But there was a horrible selfish part of him, a part that was still some scared kid trapped in a town that hated everything about him, that wanted to say it *was* unfair. He

tried to push down those feelings and thoughts while he adjusted how he sat, shifting this way and that to find a position that was a little more comfortable. But that was by and large impossible, as the continued to slip further down into his own misery.

"Really, Stan," Beverly said, breaking Richie from his thoughts. "She's great. We love her."

And Stan, nuzzling against Patricia, smiled in contentment. The pleased kind of smile that came with the approval of long time friends over a romantic partner, though Richie had his suspicions that Stan wouldn't have valued their opinion much if they had found some reason to dislike her. But as it was, she had slotted into their little band of misfits - for a given definition of misfit, now - with ease, even if the greater scope of the situation seemed a little out of her reach. Not that Richie blamed her. He wasn't sure he was entirely on board the train with every new thing thrown their way.

"I wish I'd been able to introduce you," Stan was saying. "But at least things worked out well." He paused, sending a glower that teetered on the edge of comical to everyone present. "I hate that you told her embarrassing stories about me, without me being here to defend myself. I can't believe I willingly hang out with you."

At that, there were a few conspiratorial smirks passed among them, with Patricia covering silent laughter that threatened to turn into something real. She had been around them long enough to learn their ways, after all. With a renewed shit eating grin, Richie opened his mouth. And before a word could pass his lips, before he could even formulate some embarrassing anecdote in his throat about Child Uris that only childhood friends could collect, Stan pointed at him with a swift, definitive motion.

"Beep beep, Richie! Don't you dare! That wasn't an invitation."

"You're the one who brought it up," Eddie said, taking the time then to nudge Richie with his foot just as Richie had been doing earlier. He didn't want it to stop. "And you know damn well how Richie is."

Stan rolled his eyes. "Don't I know it. And don't I regret ever befriending him." But there was the smallest, slightest quirks to his

lips that would have been missed by anyone who never had the pleasure of knowing him.

"He isn't that bad," Patricia insisted, turning to face Stan's faux aghast expression.

"Like hell he fucking isn't," Eddie shot back. "You've been around him long enough to know how shit his jokes are."

Which prompted, rather predictably, friendly teasing at Richie's expense. The kind that would sometimes dip into "mean" territory, had they not been friends who had walked into hell and back together. And it was easy, of course, enough to draw laughter from reluctant throats and push them back into the mindset where they could pretend they were doing anything else than what they really were. Were anywhere else than Derry. Of them, Eddie seemed to take the lead of it, prompting Richie to needle him.

He turned to face Eddie, partially rising off the ground to put a hand on the armrest, so close to touching Eddie's hand that the half and inch between them seemed to burn. Not that Eddie himself ever noticed. But as they fell back into their familiar back and forth, it didn't really bother him too much. He loved it, really, and how something soft and sweet swelled in his chest until it inevitably warped into some hideous thing that he tried to ignore, even as it curled through his veins.

As Richie and Eddie's verbal spar ending the fun that was lovingly mocking Richie, the attention soon turned from him and back to Stan. And the focus became attempts to fluster him with stories of their ill-spent youth in front of his wife. And Richie was left feeling worse than before, hollowed out and all his edges rotten and crumbling. The familiar ugliness that always came with affectionate displays of even the vaguest kind only exacerbated by witnessing what he could never have.

"If you're all done mocking me," he said with hurt that was only a little faked. Just something redirected into some harmless pretend. He pressed a palm to his chest, as if he had been wounded by his dearest, best friends as he stood. "I'm going to get some fresh air."

"We were just kidding, Richie," Mike said, voice still bubbling with laughter.

"I know!" he said, forcing a positive tone and a smile. He was, after all, a performer. "I just need a break from all..." He waved his hand at all of them, as if they were a crowd that was a little too much for him. He tried to make it a dismissive, carefree movement. "All this. I'll be fine," he added, because he wasn't fool enough for reality to be that far out of his mind. "I'll just be a minute.

2. Heart To Hearts

It was blessedly vacant out in the parking lot, in that period of time before people returned for the night, and for that Richie was thankful. He was lounging on one of the benches in front of the hotel, fingers pressing to his lips like he was holding an invisible cigarette and his knee bouncing with all the energy that had built up over the course of the gathering and needed somewhere to go. Just a few minutes, he told himself in a soft, steady mantra underneath all the bullshit that was trying its best to dig its claws into his flesh and drag him down some unknowable abyss.

All because he couldn't take his friends being happily in love.

Hands threaded behind his head, tangling fingers in hair and knocking askew glasses as he pulled down towards his chest. That burning jealousy still festered, still pulsed under his skin; a yawning black thing that chewed away at all the positive feelings that lingered with touches so feather light as to not have ever been there at all, until it and the fear were the only things that remained. Because of course he couldn't just let the night be something fun and easy, of course he had to focus on the smallest possible thread to pull on until he unraveled himself. He sighed, and it was a loud, shuddering thing in the otherwise still air of the early evening.

It was all things considered the perfect opportunity for It to crawl out of the cracks in the pavement and take him, though that would bring down the mood in irreparable ways. Two birds with one stone, at any rate. Take one of the group out, and shatter what little joy they had manage to grasp, despite everything.

"Fuck!" He shouted it a little louder than he had meant to, but there was no one around to care about his use of language. Not that their opinion would matter to him even at the best of times, anyway. The thought just lingered in his mind, the image of how Stan held Patricia and the way they looked at each other. Gentle touches and loving eyes and soft kisses that only came with years worth of familiar affection: things he so desperately wanted in ways that made him ache in a physical sense. But things he could hardly imagine in contexts of himself, without a feeling of something crawling under

his skin with a thousand clawed legs, reminding him it was never meant to be.

"Sulking?"

Richie, lost as he was in his circling thoughts, jolted at the sound of Stan's voice. He straightened, moving his glasses to swipe away at what might have been tears threatening to break past his eyelashes and placed them back with practiced devil-may-care ease. Clearing his throat to rid himself of any potential voice cracks, he turned to catch Stan approaching from across the parking lot while once again adjusting the sleeves of his shirt. Somewhere between Patricia's - his, their - hotel room and there, he had rolled them down to once again hide away the bandages and stitches underneath. Richie started at the sight, shame creeping up his neck to scald his face; it was not the time to make things about himself.

And that just added to the million and one other things going wrong with him. In an endless cycle of self hating bullshit.

"I'm not sulking," Richie said, in a tone that was far too defensive and Stan knew it. He knew everything, ever since the were kids, never missing a thing with those sharp eyes of his.

And right on cue, Stan's brow furrowed and his lips pulled into a tight line, his head tilting to the side as he considered Richie. Richie, for his part, pretended as if he didn't notice the shift in his expression.

"I told you guys, I just needed some air."

Stan hummed thoughtfully as he leaned over the back of the bench, just next to Richie. Fingers drummed on the plastic slates designed to look like woodwork as he stared past Richie. Past the rest of the parking lot, towards the town beyond as if nothing else mattered. There was a sort of nervous energy around him, prickling in the air like a physical force intent on making Richie's hair stand on end.

"And why are *you* out here, anyway?" he went on in the face of Stan's silence. "You're the man of the hour."

A thumb trailed along his arm from the crook of his elbow to the heel of his palm, offset from the center line by the presence of stitches, as he let out a humorless bark of a laugh. His eyes never left that distant skyline. Richie noticed, in some dim corner of his mind, that his glasses had been moved to hang from his shirt collar. "I'm happy to see you guys, but the attention is a little stifling." He cleared his throat, eyes blinking in that heavy deliberate way one does when coming into the present. He turned to face Richie with a thoughtful look of worry, and Richie wanted to crawl away from it. Get away from that studying gaze and maybe find a way to not be perceived by anyone ever again.

"Besides, I wanted to talk to you."

"Wow, I'm honored." He couldn't help the bite of sarcasm. Stan rolled his eyes and gave his arm a gentle tap. It probably would've been a punch, if things were different.

"I'm being serious," Stan said. "You've been staring at me and Patricia all night." Richie's face burned at this. "Embarrassed" did not even begin to touch how he felt, knowing he had been so blatant. "At least Ben tried to pretend he isn't." If the Earth had opened up at that moment to swallow him whole, he would not have complained.

With no such luck in the endless cruelties of the world, Richie ran his fingers through his hair and dragged his hands down his face, readjusting his glasses when they threatened to fall off. "Was I really that fucking obvious?" he asked, not even daring to look up at Stan through the gaps of his fingers. "Was I really worse than *Ben*?"

He did not need a visual to see Stan, in typical fashion, tilt his head from one side to the other while considering what he had observed. "Obvious? Not sure. But worse than Ben? Oh, definitely." Richie forced himself to look up, and there was that familiar teasing quirk to Stan's mouth. "Honestly, if I didn't know any better, I'd be suspicious that you two were independently planning on making a move on my wife."

Richie adjusted his glasses, and forced as much indigence into his voice as he could manage. It was hard to meet Stan's eyes. "And how do you know that? I'm irresistible: I'm rich, I'm famous, I'm funny."

He made a show of ticking things off on his fingers as he listed things, to which Stan only rolled his eyes and shook his head, that same smile never leaving his face.

"Richie, I've been with Patricia for around twenty years. I know what her standards are. Namely, that she has them." His gaze met Richie's, and the intense knowing look of them made Richie's facade flicker and threaten to fall away. The smile fell away into something more serious. "And I also know you."

"Her standards can't be that high, since she settled for you," Richie said before he could stop himself, before the air between them grew too somber.

Stan's eyes widened and whatever deep, insightful thing that had been stewing in that mind of his was lost in the face of Richie being the way he was. "Wow! I'm not even here for two hours and you're already being like this." He leaned forward, their foreheads close enough to touch. Richie could've kissed his nose, just to throw him off, because that sort of thing in a teasing context was okay, wasn't it? "Patty told me you cried when she told you what happened."

"Shit, man. There wasn't a dry eye in the house when we found out." In lieu of a kiss that would send him spiraling even further down, he reached up to pinch Stan's cheek. Stan placed his palm to Richie's forearm, eyes that wondered in never ending exhaustion why they were friends to begin with never leaving his, and pushed him away with a slow, deliberate motion. Richie grinned. "Glad to have you back. Anyway, you're right." Richie gave a flippant wave of his hand. "Married women aren't my type."

Stan snorted in a way that was almost undignified for people their age, and he straightened to his full height, drumming his palm against the back of the bench. He moved around so he could sit beside Richie, instead of leaning over him, his fingers always fiddling with his cuffs. Richie raised an eyebrow, eager for a thread of conversation to grasp that wasn't focused on him. Because he had an idea where Stan's train of thought was heading with that comment.

"You good there?" Stan's head shot up, eyes wide in a deer in the headlights way. As if Richie couldn't have asked him a dumber

question. Richie gestured in Stan's vague direction. "I mean, you keep fucking with your sleeves."

"Oh." He stopped, blinking as if he hadn't noticed what he was doing. After a moment of pause, he gave his arms a shake. "These things just itch like a motherfucker." A pause, one so quiet Richie swore he would have been able to hear a pin drop. There wasn't even outdoor ambiance to distract from the solemn look that darkened Stan's features, with so many things unsaid that would be too painful to pry away from him. He rubbed the pads of his fingertips just to the side of where his stitches would be. And then, because Stan wouldn't be Stan without his ability to see through bullshit, he added, "But listen, this is about *you*. And your weird hang up about me and my wife."

Richie tried to scoff in a dismissive way, rolling his eyes with a dramatic toss of his head. "So I've been single a while and got jealous. Is that a big fucking deal, Stan?"

But Stan just watched him without saying a word, thoughtful and calculating and studying in a way that made Richie itch. This was somehow worse than watching him be with his wife, but he when he tried to think of an excuse to leave they all came up short. Because Stan would know he was just trying to get out of a talk. Because Stan was so goddamn observant in ways the rest of them weren't.

"It's not," Stan said, finally, after an eternity of silence that had filled every inch of Richie until he was nothing but exposed apprehension. His jaw was tight and his teeth ground together, and he was sure Stan noticed that too. Not that he made to break his train of thought to comment on it, because that would only give Richie an opening to try to derail things again.

"But it's weird, Richie. I almost-" He broke off, eyes closing and his chest heaving in a deep, rattling breath. Briefly lost in his own inner struggle, before his eyes opened up again. "I almost died and you're focusing on how affectionate I am with Patricia like this? Because you don't have a girlfriend? You're not that fucking shallow, I know you aren't."

"It's been thirty years. Maybe I am. Maybe you don't know me as well as you fucking think you do, anymore." Tension coiled in his

shoulders and boiled in his stomach and he just wanted Stan to stop staring at him. There was a bite to his words, a needling antagonism that felt so easy to slip into, just to get people to leave him alone. It made the guilt surge, until he felt nauseous with it, but he tamped it down and hid it away.

Stan's expression shifted into frustrated disbelief, mouth opening and closing and eyes narrowing beneath furrowed brows. "Why are you being like this?" he snapped. "I'm trying to figure out what's going on with you because I'm worried and you're just insisting on being a piece of shit about it."

"Because I wasn't really expecting to be psychoanalyzed, Stanley!" Richie shot back. "So what if I'm jealous of you and your wife? Why are you on my fucking dick about it and not Ben?"

"I would be talking to him if he'd been the one to just leave the hotel room," was the reply, a little more measured and steady than Richie probably deserved. But there was still a sharp undercurrent to his words. Richie looked away from him, nerves twisting and revolting at this.

And the problem was, Richie thought, almost everyone knew what Ben's problem was. He was so smitten, so stupidly head over heels that any jealousy or lingering stares could be filed away and accounted for. Things ran a little deeper with Richie, though he suspected - and perhaps even knew, in the time before the memory loss really set in - that Stan was already aware. At the very least, that he had all the pieces and was fully capable of stringing them together; the idea of that made his stomach drop, made him want to claw out of his own skin because if one person knew, who else did?

So lost in his thoughts, he failed to notice Stan taking a few deep breaths until one shook and threatened to shatter. Richie glanced back to see him curling fingers in hair and dragging palms down his face; he could see, then, small little scars that were nothing more than pinpricks at this jawline that weren't there a few minutes ago. Teeth marks from a long ago brush with death. "Sorry," Stan mumbled. "For putting you on the spot. I didn't-" He cut himself off, fingertips pressed to eyelids. Shoulders shook, just slightly. "I am worried," he said, whisper soft. "But I wasn't thinking."

Much like Eddie in one of his *moments* Stan plowed ahead, not giving Richie time to breathe let alone get a word in edgewise. "People have been *staring* at me since before I even left Georgia," he said. "And tonight it's been..." He trailed off, once again moving to idly touch his bandages. "I don't know. I don't! It's hard not to notice someone staring at you all night after that, you know? And I just jumped on the chance to get the focus off *me* for once."

Without thinking too much about it, before he could second guess what he was doing wrapped up in all those insecurities and whatever other hell his mind had in store for him, Richie reached out and placed a hand on Stan's knee. He could feel him jolt in surprise at the touch, and smirked up at him when their eyes met.

"It's fine," he said, something more truth than a lie. He forced a smile and Stan offered one in response, something small and watery but approaching the grin Richie knew he had. And there was the thought, somewhere in the back of his mind, that they had all come so close to never being able to see that again, and an unknowable thing in his chest ached. "I mean you did lose a lot of blood, who knows what it did to that brain of yours?"

The joke was in poor taste, he knew, but Stan's giggling laugh was genuine and familiar in its exasperation and it made him feel a little lighter, somehow. And Richie's smile became a little more genuine, too, because things were a little easier like this.

"And I *guess*, if I'm being *honest*, I should've laid off a bit." He leaned back, throwing arms over the back of the bench and angling face towards the darkening sky. Soon they would have to return inside, he thought. "Being back's just kicked up a lot of shit that I didn't want to think about." It wasn't really something that needed to be said, not to any of them but especially not to Stan, but there was a rightness in saying out loud in that moment. "Not that I need to tell you that. Meeting your wife's been cool, though."

Stan hummed in reply, giving the slightest of nods just out of the corner of Richie's periphery. "She really does like you guys a lot. She told me that *you* annoyed her for updates on me."

"The hell did you think I was going to do? Just sit around with a

thumb up my ass and not ask how you were doing?"

He knew without seeing it that Stan was rolling his eyes. "I'm just saying that regardless of whatever's got you fucked up right now that you don't want to talk about, you're a good person? But maybe I should take that back."

There was that pressure against his ribs again, bearing down with enough weight to snap fragile bones and tendons that had grown brittle with the resurgence of memories. He hated it, really, the resurfacing feelings from when he was a scared teenager who had nowhere better to run because there *was* nowhere better to go. The comment, innocuous and harmless as it was from the voice of an old friend still managed to burrow its way under the thick skin and layers of armor he had worked so hard to build up to tear into him. It was a mood killer, but what was he to do. Air forced itself from his lungs in a low, heavy sigh.

"I know it's been awhile," Stan said, the brief reprieve slipping away and the melancholy tension creeping back in. "But we're still friends, and you can talk to me."

"I just don't want you guys hating me." The words stumbled past his already weak filter before he could even form the thought that maybe he should just keep his mouth shut. But the air around them had turned raw and open and threatening to split at the seams, so it was almost inevitable that something was going to give. His breath hitched in his chest and shame dragged itself up his arms to his shoulder and neck, determined to gnaw its way to his brain and heart, leaving nothing in its wake. "There. How's that for you?"

He sat a little straighter, fingers curling in his lap and nails digging through his jeans to bear into his skin. Pinpoints of pain that he could focus on, while he forced himself to meet Stan's gaze and not look anywhere else; he noticed that some of the pinprick scars had grown into something more resembling teeth marks that had torn at skin years ago. Not too noticeable, even then, for anyone who didn't know what to look for. But he did.

"Why would we hate you?" Stan asked, friendly vitriol replaced with concern. "We've been through hell and back together, that's going to

be pretty hard to do." There was an edge to his voice that even Richie was able to pick up, a quiet kind of self assurance that came with a statement the speaker so desperately wanted to believe themselves.

"I don't know what you want me to say." That when he watched Stan and Patricia he wanted nothing more than for that to be himself and Eddie, pressed together in that affection that only came with years of togetherness and familiarity? To be held and adored with that kind of totality by the person who made his heart flutter like he was thirteen again, pining for someone who always seemed just out of his grasp? And that the mere consideration of how maybe - just maybe - it was something he could have made his stomach twist?

He swallowed hard against the lump in his throat, the voice of that damn clown ringing in his ears with its threat to tell everyone. Casual as could be, more real and tangible than anything else that could be thrown their way, somehow.

"No one's going to hate you," Stan said. And there was that hint of desperate wanting to believe it to be true, and the part of Richie's mind scrambling around in the dark wondered what on Earth he could mean with that tone. Because some horrible part of him wanted to assume the worst.

But then he went on, words seeming to stumble over themselves, edges pressing a little too close together. "You know, when I was in the hospital..." Fingers tugged at a loose thread on his sleeves, and his attention was once again locked on the horizon. "I was *so sure* that everyone was mad at me. You know, for breaking the oath."

Richie raised an eyebrow, the pieces trying to fit together in his minds eye but still getting a little tangled in the weeds of self doubt. "Did you really think we were going to hate you for something like that?" Stan gave a sheepish half shrug, sending him a sideways glance, and Richie nudged him with his foot. "What kind of monsters do you think we are?"

"That's my point, dipshit." And he let out a small, uncertain laugh. "Sometimes you just focus on things that aren't true, and it makes you do really, really stupid things." He frowned for a moment, considering something, before his lips quirked into that smile of his,

and added, "Okay, maybe that's not the best comparison. We got hit in the face with different things. But I don't want to see you drowning."

Richie said nothing for a long stretch of time, and Stan let him without any more words of his own. But the silence this time wasn't filled with awkward energy that buzzed between them and threatened to set the world on fire. It reminded him more of when they were kids, in those quiet moments when everything seemed a little less hostile. A little less like they had the sword of Damocles hanging over them.

And maybe if they were going to die here, in this town that had always hated them, there were worse things than people knowing.

"Okay," Richie said. His breath caught in his throat, the words that were trying to form there snagging on years of repression and doubt and loathing that only festered the longer it was ignored. "Watching you and Patty sucked because I've never had something like that. Ever. And I don't think I *can*."

"I hope you don't think we're always like that," Stan said lightly, in his own attempt to keep the conversation from spiraling into the abyss. Which it might just do anyway. "I've been in the hospital for the last few days- I missed her so much it *hurt*." His tone softened at the edges, and Richie knew his expression had taken on the air of someone so thoroughly, deeply in love. "It's really nice to come back to someone who loves you." And there was a silent addition, one that echoed in the still of the evening air: "and you deserve that too."

"Could've fooled me," Richie said. "It was hard to tell the two of you apart." He waved his hand, dismissing the idea of it. "But no, I don't think it's for me, because..."

He trailed off, and Stan leaned towards him, eyes watching him expectantly. Richie half expected him to put his glasses back on, to better observe him. Richie breathed deeply, though it struggled all the way down to his lungs and it still felt like it would never be enough air.

"Because I like men." There. "I'm gay and honest to God I thought you

knew that."

Stan settled back. And Richie was relieved that there wasn't a lull in the conversation, where Richie could fill in the gaps with his own ideas that would only grow more and more dire with time. "I mean, I did have my suspicions." He spread his hands, palms towards the sky as he shrugged again. "But I never really thought it was my place to confront you about it."

"Then why tonight?" And there was relief, deep in the pit of his stomach, a cool, healing pulse against his self loathing that still tried to boil there. He could have started crying; in fact, he wasn't so sure there weren't tears building up at the corners of his eyes already.

"Because I could tell me and my wife were killing you?" Stan said, gently. Patiently. "We all know Ben's smitten and has his own baggage to unpack. But I wanted to talk to you."

And then, with no other prompting and no other words, he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around Richie. Pulled him close until Stan could rest his chin on Richie's shoulder; his arms were angled to accommodate for the injuries there, but the embrace was tight, and it was warm, and it was filled with the memory of a friendship sealed with a blood oath. Richie froze, and a few tears escaped past his eyelids to leave burning trails in their wake, but after a moment more he returned the hug. There was no one there to see them, after all.

"We love you, man," Stan said, echoing words long ago said to him. "And we'd never abandon you."

They sat like that for some time, though Richie tried his best not to dissolve into a sobbing mess. He was, at most, half successful, but Stan never made a comment on it. And Richie did feel a little lighter, though he still tucked certain particulars away to be revealed later. Maybe never. But one secret out in the open was enough, for the time being, and it was just one less thing that the clown had any power over.



When the all encompassing shaking had subsided and the tears had slowed to a stop, the two of them pulled away from each other. Stan kept his hands on Richie's shoulders, smiling warmly and lovingly at him, which Richie returned.

"I'm being serious," Stan said. "You don't have to tell them, but I don't think anyone will abandon you. Just like you never abandoned me."

"Thanks." And he meant it, though his voice still wavered and shook. He cleared his throat, swiping at his eyes to try to set himself somewhere close to normal. He tossed a look over his shoulder at the hotel, and said, "We should probably get back, before they send out a search party."

Stan followed his gaze to the door, and nodded, "Yeah. We were probably missed."

Unable to help himself, Richie laughed as he got to his feet. "Patty might be in there telling stories about you," he said, reaching out to help Stan up. There was a look of dawning horror on Stan's face, which only made Richie laugh harder. "She's been refusing to tell us anything."

Stan touched palm to cheek. "Oh no."

"She must've been waiting for you to get here." The grin was wicked. Stan's eyes widened. "This is what you get for being with the same person since college," Richie went on. "She knows what buttons to push."

Stan pivoted and set off to the hotel with a light jog, to do damage control for whatever his wife was telling without him there. Which, Richie thought as he followed after Stan, was definitely not the worst problem to have in a relationship.

Notes for the Chapter:

art by my friend bruni (who you can find on [twitter](#) & [tumblr](#) at paraqeets!!)

3. Confessions

It had seemed they returned just in the nick of time to avoid any serious panic. They had told themselves that they were just outside, talking, but with everything else that had been going on the worry about the group splitting at that time of night always lingered. Vulnerability was the enemy, after all.

Stan had knocked on the door - having forgotten a key card, which Richie was quick to mock him for and Stan was quick to "beep beep" *him* for - with a little more enthusiasm than necessary. Patricia was quick to open the door and usher them inside, staying close to Stan as if there was a magnetic pull between them. The sight of it, despite the confession, still caused a pang of envy in Richie's chest, though it was a little muted. A little more bearable. As he padded into the circle still settled on the ground, towards where Eddie still sat in the armchair to retake his position, he shared a meaningful look with Stan.

"What took you guys so long?" Beverly said, having edged around to take up a spot beside Ben while they were outside. Richie noticed, too, that Bill now sat closer to Mike.

Richie sat beside the armchair, leaning against it as if he had never left in the first place. Eddie looked down on him with a quizzical look on his face, and Richie just beamed up at him; he half expected, half hoped really, that Eddie would slide down and sit beside him. But he didn't make a move. Though Richie could, with some ease now that a percentage of the haze had been lifted from his mind, Eddie's rationale regarding how unsanitary hotel floors were. He was, in retrospect, a little shocked that Eddie hadn't bullied him for the chair in the first place.

"We were just talking," Stan said, at the same time Richie said "Dick measuring." And Stan, who had up to that point still been lingering in the shared moment between them, gave him a look that exactly mirrored the kind he used when they were kids.

Richie tilted his head back with a bark of a laugh. Stan, with an exasperated sigh, said, "Like I said. Just talking."

"You were gone awhile," Ben said. He was close enough to touch Beverly if he wanted, hands mere inches apart, Richie noticed, much like he was close enough to touch Eddie. Birds of a feather, he supposed, feeling a twinge of sympathy even if Ben's issues hovered on a different frequency than his.

"That's because we went on an amazing emotional journey that none of you were invited on," Richie said. It was easier for him now, the weight of the world a little less oppressive. It still sat there, pounds of weight right over his ribs to break through to crush his lungs and heart, but the pressure was lighter.

"Just some catching up," Stan said. He had taken position once again with Patricia, though now she leaned against his side with her head resting against his shoulder. They fit together so perfectly, and through the small crumbling space of his wall that had fallen away, Richie realized that anyone in their right mind would be jealous of them. What they had was the kind of love that they made sappy romance movies out of, the ones that straight people couldn't get enough of.

"What were *you* doing without *us*?" Richie asked, the beginnings of panic prickling under his skin at the mere thought of them prying a little too close into their conversation. And some nagging part of his mind, one that sounded so much like Stan that drowned out the mocking voice of It, told him how ridiculous that was.

"Patricia was telling us how she met Stan," Mike said, dragging Richie from the circling of his thoughts.

Stan's eyes grew wide. "You weren't," he said to her, and she smiled at him, the look of innocence only worn by people who know what they're doing. "Patty. It's so embarrassing."

She laughed, giving him a gentle shove. "No it's not," she said. "It's cute! You only think it's embarrassing because you were nineteen."

He rolled his eyes with an exasperated groan, throwing his head back as if whatever she was telling them was the worst possible thing in his memory banks. "I fell out of a tree."

There was a moment of quiet in the room, the kind of hummed with energy and just waited to spill over, unable to be contained any longer. Furtive glances were shared among the group, lips thin and faces tight with laughter that threatened to bubble to the surface; all the while Patricia's smile turned a little more knowing, a little more mischievous. Richie was the one to break the spell with a peel of laughter, and the others followed suit.

"You didn't tell them that." The intonation was flat, defeated in a way that just made them laugh harder, if only by a few degrees.

"No," she said with a certain pleased smugness that reminded Richie a little bit of a cat catching a mouse. "All I said was that I met you bird watching in college. Which!" She tapped his nose when he opened his mouth to counter her. "Is not a lie, because you were bird watching. You just happened to fall out of the tree you were in."

He took hold of the hand still touching his face, entwining his fingers with hers, mouth turning down and brows knitting together in an exaggerated look of anger. "You are so mean to me."

She laughed as he kissed her knuckles. "I don't think that's as mean as the time I asked if you were a business major."

Eddie stiffened at this, and Richie cast a look upwards to see an expression that so clearly meant he was gearing up to defend the art of business in only the way he could- fast and with as many swears as he could manage. Before he could stop himself by getting bogged down in the thoughts that still circled around at the fringes of his mind, and get tangled up in that ugly feeling again only held at bay by the lingering warmth of that moment of openness, Richie reached out and patted Eddie's leg, allowing his hand to linger a little longer than was perhaps wise. Maybe if he was lucky Eddie wouldn't notice it.

"It's not that deep, man." He dared to add, "We all know business majors are the scourge of college campuses."

Eddie looked down at him with that same comical expression of annoyance, though everyone familiar with him knew that it was all too real. It seemed for a moment that his own ire was about to turn

to Richie, as it so often did, and Richie so hoped that it would. He beamed up at him, which only served to pull the corners of Eddie's mouth further downward.

"Like you know anything about college, Richie," he said.

"I went to college!" The offended tone was nothing more than an act, of course. But that was part of their back and forth, after all.

Voices chimed in to tease Eddie and talk about various college experiences with business majors, until they were sharing stories from the school years from when they had been apart. It did not take long until the room was a cacophony of noise, warm voices and just the soft glowing feeling of long established friendship. Without thinking much of it, Richie leaned closer to Eddie, until his cheek almost pressed against his leg, arm thrown up dramatically over his lap, even if the angle was awkward. If he had wanted to, and there was a part of him that fluttered at the points of contact that really truly did, he could have taken Eddie's hand. And then drag him to the floor, like they were kids again, as the part of his brain that still reeled and spiraled in its panic tried to reel him in. Remind him of those ugly realities that couldn't be chased away by a single heart to heart.

Before the two parts of him could really dig into the fight and leave him feeling like he'd been hollowed out of every good sensation he'd ever had, with only rot left behind, Eddie's hand brushed his own. Almost as if to slap him away, but the touch lingered. Soft and careful and even edging the line of dainty, the one extreme of Eddie Kaspbrak that the Losers weren't always privy to. It made something in Richie's stomach flutter, heart pounding against his ribs with enough force to break them. And there was that foul part of him that hated this, that howled for him to move away before anyone *realized* anything.

But he didn't move. Eddie's hand remained where it was, fingertips touching the edge of Richie's hand like they were a breath away from worming their way under his palm to hold him. In that moment the line of conversation had been lost, the voices of his friends swirling around his periphery but nothing quite landing. It might as well just have been the two of them, and Richie almost snorted, feeling for all

the world like a love sick teenager all over again, who did things like write "Richie Kaspbrak" in his diary. Not that he ever did that. Not that he ever did that and would freely admit to it, anyway.

"Do you mind if we sleep here tonight?" Mike said, drawing Richie back into the present.

He pulled away from Eddie, the warmth of his touch lingering along his skin like electricity. Straightened up against the seat, a little less casual than before though he still screamed for the contact. But by then attention was likely to slide over to him, and he wasn't sure he could handle that. As he looked at the others, he caught Stan's eye; his expression thoughtful as he continued to lean against Patricia, holding her hand like some kind of reminder to Richie. There was the slightest cock of his head, so minute that Richie thought that he might have imagined it. Then, after a beat of their gazes locking, Stan turned to Mike, an eyebrow raised.

"What?"

"We were talking about it while you guys were outside." Ben gestured at Stan and Richie. "No one really wants to leave, you know?"

"It'll be like when we were kids," Beverly chimed in. Her smile was restrained and her laugh was mild, but her voice was light. Filled with her own things to unpack, though Richie's mind couldn't latch on to them.

Richie's stomach plummeted, all the good will and warmth draining with one fell swoop, like something had punctured his soul. He edged a little away from Eddie, hands tucking into his lap so no one could see wringing fingers. It's voice echoed in his ears again, of stupid childish sleepover games that he had always dreaded. At the time, he always had an answer prepared, either witty or "serious" depending on the situation. But it always made his breath catch in his throat, always a hairs breadth from discovery. A hand curled into a fist, knuckles pressing against his hip; fingers pressed into palm hard enough to hurt. Certainly leave behind indentations from fingernails, at least.

He barely heard Stan's reply, his voice floating through miles of fog

to land in his ears and not make any sense once they were there. Breath hitched in his throat in a soft gasp he hoped no one heard. Whatever brief respite his talk with Stan provided crumbled away for the clawing worry that he wasn't hiding well enough; he took a deep breath, forced it down as he had many times before. There was no one staring at him, he knew that in the more objective sense of it. But it nonetheless felt like all eyes - and then some - were on him.

The conversation went on without him and he heard almost none of it, the voices of his friends blurring together into meaningless white noise while he tried to keep his breath even and his nerves from fraying at the edges. Because he was back at square one, like someone had snatched away that singular life preserver and he was left adrift again. And that was perhaps what made it worse this time, the conflicting truths he knew to the very core of his being - that his friends loved him and that they would hate him for being the way he was - weighing him down into silence.

It wasn't until he heard his name that he came back into the present; some part of him had been processing what was being said, one some trained subconscious level to pick out the best places for him to jump back into.

"You in on the idea, Richie?" someone - Bill, he thought after a moment of pause - had said. It took Richie's mind a moment to process it, too fast for anyone else in the room to notice but it was there all the same.

"Are you fucking kidding?" Richie said, the word no screaming in his head and dancing along his skin in a steady pulsing beat. "Of course I am."

"So that's everyone," Patricia said, patting Stan's leg. Richie wondered, clinging to the first thought that wasn't about himself - a thread to tug on to keep his mind afloat - if the two were a little disappointed that they wouldn't have any alone time on their first night together again. And would be denied whatever that alone time would entail.

He shut down that line of thought before it could go down avenues he didn't want to consider, no matter how many jokes he made about

it.

"Can't wait to have to explain to the hotel staff why a bunch of middle aged people are sharing a hotel room," Richie said, cracking a smile he didn't really feel. "Good thing we're famous. Or bad thing, depending on how you look at it."

There was laughter, if only because everyone was still clinging to the relief of the night in the face of so much awful they've put up with for the last few days. It wasn't a particularly good joke, not up to his usual standards even if the others would argue that they weren't that high to begin with. A light, almost airy energy permeated through the room, almost enough to combat the festering, dirty feeling that crawled along his arms until he wanted to scrub his skin off just to feel free of it.

But it was good, he thought. Forced himself to think so that he could perhaps believe it himself. Fingers, ones that shook in the most minute of ways, reached up to adjust his glasses even though they had been in a fine position. There was merely a restless energy that had settled in his bones that called out for him to do something. Anything.

Thoughts swirled around his head, curling ever downward into the pit that never seemed too far out of reach. The wall Stan had somehow managed to break down was quick to rebuild itself in the face of everyone else, it seemed. Something in him ached, like he was on the verge of being sick in the middle of the hotel room and thus become responsible for dragging the whole mood down. He brushed against where Eddie had touched him and felt, for a faint moment, a swell of warmth that combated the cold, familiar self hatred.

If you say anything, that hideous voice said, *he may never want to touch you again. Maybe he won't even want to look at you again.*

And then there was Stan's voice, echoing those long ago sentiments that had felt so true at the time. Had been true in the most concrete sense of the term. Were still true, in a way that said that maybe. Just maybe. The risk was worth taking, with those who had entered hell together and sealed their companionship with an oath to return when the time came. He clung to that like a lifeline, pulling himself away

from the knife edge that bordered the abyss.

Before he could think any better of it, before the illusion of safety could wobble and shatter with all its imperfections, he steadied himself. Eyes closing against the pending judgement, lungs fighting to draw in enough air, he took the leap.

"Can I make an announcement, guys?" It was embarrassing, how much his voice shook in his throat. He did not have to see that everyone was staring at him, though when his eyes opened one again he locked gazes with Stan who watched him with the slightest of tilts to his head. He couldn't bring himself to look at Eddie; he didn't know what expression he would be wearing, and he didn't want to know.

No one said anything for a long while, his tone apparently not lost on everyone else in the room. Bill tried to crack a smile as he said, "What, your marriage to Eddie's mom?" It was valiant in its attempt to lighten the mood, but it failed to get anyone to react. The atmosphere turned a little suffocating, though Richie suppose that could just be in his mind.

"Go ahead, Richie," Beverly finally said. He almost hated how gentle, how sympathetic she sounded. He didn't like the idea that it was so obvious that he was dying on the inside.

"I just wanted to tell you guys that I'm, uhm." The words faltered and fell flat, snagging with cruel thorns in his throat. Why was this so hard, why did nothing want to work the way they should. "That I, uh." He averted his gaze from them, adjusting his glasses as he looked at the floor. He cleared his throat and said, what little courage he had having fled into the dark shadows of his soul, "Never mind. I shouldn't take the spotlight off Stan tonight."

He looked up, just long enough to see Stan cocking an eyebrow at him, as if reminding him to please for the love of God take the spotlight off him. But he said nothing, did nothing to give Richie away.

"Since when did you learn to shut up?" Eddie said, incredulous and sarcastic in a way that hid any worry that could've been buried there.

"Come on," and that was Beverly. "Tell us." He looked up at her, at her soft and encouraging smile. He imagined it vanishing, turning into something awful and snarling. He almost cringed away from it, if he wasn't well practiced enough in pretending everything was fine.

All eyes were on him in that moment, really and truly. And he was used to that, used to being the center of attention. Thrived in it, even. But at this he just wanted to curl up and fade into the background, swearing at himself for even having the idea of saying anything. He threw his head back, making contact with the wood of the chair that was only cushioned by a thin layer of padding enough to hurt. Hands crawled up under his glasses to press against closed eyelids, then dragged down his cheeks. *It's fine*, he thought. *I can do this*. He tried to think of Stan's words, tried to tap into that sense of relief and the promise of lasting love. He took a deep breath.

"I'm gay," he said to the ceiling, hands still pressing against his face. Words were soft and muffled, inaudible even to him. He closed his eyes tighter against the world, teeth grinding together, and he spoke again, louder and as articulated as he could manage before anyone else could gather themselves enough to reply. "I'm gay."

His hands fell to his lap and he could feel the tension in the room shift. No one said a word and it was like all of Earth's gravity had decided to concentrate itself into that hotel room in that instant. He didn't look at anyone, couldn't bear to. There was that trepidation that set in in those beats of silences, the pulsing seconds that ticked into minutes and ticked further into eternity that managed to bury its way under skin and into muscle and bone as he waited for the shoe to drop.

Muscle tensed under skin as he braced for impact, preparing for it in any of its forms. But then he felt someone shift near him, hesitant and slow, pausing for a few heartbeats when Richie instinctively flinched away, until arms draped across his shoulders. He didn't open his eyes, didn't look, but he knew by the careful placement of the embrace that it was Stan. Pulled him close and tight, just as before.

There were a few beats of nothing but that, where Richie's breathing returned to something resembling a normal pace and the tension in his back easing to something that didn't physically hurt. Then there

were other bodies around him, pulling him from his position against the armchair to better center him in a newly forming hug pile. Seven bodies piling on top and around him, pressing close as if to chase away any gaps in space between them, to fold eight into one. And he could have laughed, really, with that kind of hysteric relief that bubbled at the base of the throat and stung at the eyes; sharp reminders of existence in a situation that teetered on the edge of the unreal.

None of them moved, none of them spoke: no questions of "how long" and "why didn't you tell us", though he was sure those would come later. And that was alright with him, and he could ignore the dread that fought against the warmth that spread from the points of contact. There was love there in that moment, the kind that was warm and understood only by those who had faced hell together. The kind of love of those who chose each other, and would choose each other time and again even when the world came apart at the seams. Though maybe he was, in the delirium of his relief, falling too far into sentimentality that would leave him feeling embarrassed later; he at least had the sense of mind not to mention it, lest the moment be ruined.

He felt a little foolish, even as long learned instincts tried to scream at him that this will not - could not - last, for ever assuming the worst of them. That was the result of letting things settle in and fester for decades, fears that weren't strictly unfounded but ones that turned the truth away.

They sat that way for a while, until the somber air that Richie had dragged in had faded back to the light atmosphere they had enjoyed the whole night. And would continue to enjoy, unless some unforeseen horror decided to crash the party, which was always a possibility in Derry, Maine.

But in the meantime, in the breath of air between rounds of terror, he supposed there were worse things than his friends knowing. Uncertainties were sure to creep in later, the doubts and insecurities and the things left between the lines that could be endlessly picked at until the world was fraying, but those could wait. In the meantime, this was enough.

Notes for the Chapter:

wow this is done. this thing that was only supposed to be a few hundred words. it's fine

i really just wanted this to be done but i am pretty proud of it :P i do have a few discordant scenes for this left up my sleeve i'll probably be posting later

but for now aaaay

also the title of the fic is from "constellations" by the oh hellos

come bother me on tumblr if you want at timelessmulder